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MENTAL HEALTH AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE CONFERENCE TO BE HELD IN VIRGINIA BEACH

Governor Kaine keynote speaker in statewide event to improve mental health and criminal justice systems collaboration

Richmond, VA – Next week, representatives from local communities across Virginia will gather in Virginia Beach as part of a statewide effort to address the challenging needs of individuals with mental illness in the Commonwealth's criminal justice system. Co-hosted by the Virginia Departments of Criminal Justice Services and Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, the Governor's Conference for Mental Health and Criminal Justice Transformation will be held May 13-14 at the Wyndham Virginia Beach Oceanfront Hotel in Virginia Beach.

The conference is in response to Governor Timothy M. Kaine's [Executive Order 62](#) that established the Commonwealth Consortium for Mental Health/Criminal Justice Transformation. Supported in part by a grant from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance, the consortium will develop a comprehensive plan to prevent individuals with mental illness from entering Virginia's criminal justice system and to promote improved access to needed mental health treatment for current inmates with mental illness.

"States nationwide are facing difficult questions surrounding the numbers of individuals with mental illness in jails," said Governor Kaine. "We have an opportunity for state and local officials to solve problems collaboratively and improve treatment for individuals with mental illness in both jails and in communities, and to further improve public safety."

Localities across the state will be represented at the conference by a team of individuals who will begin developing and implementing community-based approaches to jail diversion for individuals with mental illness. Each team will include a general district court judge, a commonwealth's attorney, a public defender or indigent defense counsel, the jail superintendent or sheriff, the locality's chief of police (in localities with both police and sheriff's departments), the local community corrections director, and the community services board executive director.

Recent surveys have shown that 16 percent of jail inmates across the U.S. have some form of mental illness. The 2005 Virginia Jail Survey produced similar results. Furthermore, Virginia findings suggest that individuals with mental illness are often arrested and incarcerated for minor offenses related to their symptoms, and that many jail inmates with mental illness do not receive adequate mental health treatment in jails or when they return to the community.

"Preventing arrests of individuals with mental illness involves ensuring law enforcement officers are trained to recognize certain behaviors and improving the access to community-based mental health services," said James Reinhard, M.D., commissioner of the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services. "When incarceration cannot be avoided, we should work together so inmates with mental illness have treatment that meets standards of care, including counseling services, appropriate medications and comprehensive discharge planning."

A conference agenda and further background information can be found at www.dmhmrzas.virginia.gov/OFS-MHCJConsortium.htm. Media planning to attend the event should contact [Meghan McGuire](#) at (804) 786-9048.

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Virginia's public mental health, mental retardation and substance abuse services system is comprised of 16 state facilities and 40 community services boards (CSBs) that serve children and adults who have or who are at risk of mental illness, serious emotional disturbance, mental retardation, or substance use disorders.